INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES BULLETIN
ISSN: (E) 3007-1917 (P) 3007-1909
Volume 4, Issue 3, 2026

INTRA-PARTY DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL PARTY INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN PAKISTAN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES (2008–2025)

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21872547

Received	Accepted	Published
26 January 2026	11 March 2026	25 March 2026

ABSTRACT

Political parties are central to democratic governance because they provide mechanisms for political representation, leadership recruitment, policy formulation, and citizen participation. In Pakistan, however, the development of democratic political institutions has been accompanied by persistent concerns regarding weak intra-party democracy, centralized leadership, elite dominance, and limited participation of ordinary party members in organizational decision-making. This study examines the relationship between intra-party democracy and political party institutionalization in Pakistan through a comparative analysis of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) during the period 2008–2025. The study employs a qualitative comparative research design based on the analysis of party constitutions, intra-party election practices, official party documents, Election Commission of Pakistan materials, scholarly literature, and other relevant secondary sources. The analysis focuses on leadership selection, internal party elections, candidate selection, member participation, policy-making, organizational autonomy, and leadership succession. The study finds that although all three parties maintain formal organizational structures and mechanisms for internal elections, decision-making remains substantially influenced by centralized leadership and established political elites. The extent and form of intra-party democracy vary across the three parties, but the persistence of personalized leadership limits organizational autonomy and constrains deeper institutionalization. The study contributes to the literature by linking intra-party democratic practices with political party institutionalization and demonstrating how leadership centralization and elite dominance shape the organizational development of major political parties in Pakistan. It argues that strengthening meaningful internal participation, competitive leadership selection, transparency, and institutional autonomy is essential for improving democratic consolidation in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Intra-party democracy; political party institutionalization; political leadership; Pakistan; PPP; PML-N; PTI; party organization; democratic governance*

1. Introduction

Political parties are fundamental institutions in modern democratic systems because they connect citizens with the state, organize political participation, aggregate social interests, recruit political leaders, formulate public policies, and

provide mechanisms through which citizens can influence government. Democratic governance therefore depends not only on elections between competing parties but also on the organizational quality and internal functioning of political parties. Huntington (1968) argues that political institutionalization is closely associated with the capacity of political organizations to develop stable procedures and structures that can survive changes in individual leadership. In this context, parties that depend heavily on individual personalities may achieve electoral success while remaining institutionally fragile. Janda (1980) similarly emphasizes that the organizational characteristics of political parties are important for understanding their political behavior, continuity, and development.

Intra-party democracy represents an important dimension of democratic party organization. It broadly concerns the participation of party members in leadership selection, candidate nomination, policy development, organizational decision-making, and internal accountability (Scarrow, 2005). Although political parties are expected to compete democratically for public office, their internal structures may not necessarily operate according to equally democratic principles. Party leaders and elites may retain substantial control over organizational decisions, candidate selection, and policy formulation. Consequently, a party can be electorally competitive while maintaining highly centralized internal structures. Cross and Katz (2013) emphasize that the democratic quality of a party cannot be assessed simply by the existence of formal elections; meaningful intra-party democracy also requires genuine participation and influence by party members.

The relationship between intra-party democracy and party institutionalization is particularly important. Randall and Svåsand (2002) conceptualize party institutionalization through dimensions including systemness, value infusion, autonomy, and reification. These dimensions demonstrate that a party becomes institutionalized when its organizational structures become stable, socially rooted, and capable of functioning with a degree of autonomy from individual personalities. Mainwaring and Scully (1995) similarly identify institutionalized parties and party systems as important components of democratic stability. Strong parties require durable organizational procedures through which leadership can be selected, political candidates can be nominated, policies can be developed, and authority can be transferred without excessive dependence on individual leaders.

Pakistan provides an important context for examining these issues. The country's political history has been characterized by alternating periods of civilian and authoritarian rule, institutional instability, and repeated changes in the relationship between political parties and state institutions. These historical conditions have affected the development of political parties and their organizational structures. The restoration of electoral civilian politics after 2008 created an important period for examining whether repeated electoral competition contributed to the institutionalization of major parties. The general elections of 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2024 witnessed significant changes in electoral competition and governing coalitions, while PPP, PML-N, and PTI emerged as particularly important national political actors.

Despite their differences in history, ideology, organizational development, and electoral mobilization, these three parties have also demonstrated significant elements of leadership personalization. PPP has historically been strongly associated with the Bhutto political legacy, PML-N with the Sharif political family, and PTI with the leadership of Imran Khan. These patterns raise important questions about whether formal party institutions possess sufficient autonomy from dominant political personalities. The issue is therefore not simply whether parties conduct internal elections or maintain formal constitutions, but whether these institutions provide meaningful opportunities for members to influence leadership, candidate selection, policy-making, and organizational decisions.

Although Pakistan has experienced repeated electoral competition and periods of civilian government since 2008, major parties continue to face challenges concerning centralized leadership,

limited internal competition, personality-oriented politics, and weak organizational autonomy. Political parties formally maintain constitutions, internal elections, executive committees, membership structures, and other organizational institutions. However, the existence of these formal mechanisms does not necessarily demonstrate meaningful intra-party democracy. A significant distinction therefore exists between formal party democracy and substantive party democracy.

Formal party democracy includes party constitutions, internal elections, executive committees, organizational councils, and membership procedures. Substantive intra-party democracy, in contrast, concerns whether members genuinely participate in leadership selection, candidate nomination, policy-making, internal debate, and accountability. The persistence of leadership centralization within major parties raises questions concerning whether party institutions are capable of constraining dominant political personalities or whether organizational structures primarily reinforce existing leadership arrangements. Michels' (1962) argument concerning the oligarchic tendencies of organizations is particularly relevant because formal democratic structures can coexist with concentrated organizational authority.

The central problem addressed by this study is therefore the gap between the formal institutionalization of political parties and the substantive practice of intra-party democracy in Pakistan. Existing scholarship has examined Pakistani political parties through electoral competition, political leadership, dynastic politics, ideology, and democratic development, but comparatively less attention has been given to systematically comparing intra-party democratic practices and party institutionalization across PPP, PML-N, and PTI over an extended period. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between leadership structures, internal democratic practices, and organizational institutionalization between 2008 and 2025.

This study contributes to political science scholarship by connecting two closely related but analytically distinct concepts: intra-party democracy and political party institutionalization. It contributes to the literature on Pakistani politics by providing a comparative assessment of PPP, PML-N, and PTI rather than examining individual parties in isolation. The study is also relevant to democratic consolidation because stronger and more autonomous parties can provide more stable channels of political participation and leadership recruitment. Furthermore, the research contributes to comparative politics by examining how formal democratic institutions interact with personalized leadership and elite influence within political parties.

The study may also have practical significance for political parties and electoral institutions. Its findings can assist parties in identifying weaknesses in leadership selection, candidate nomination, member participation, and internal accountability. For the Election Commission of Pakistan, the study highlights the importance of balancing legal oversight of intra-party elections with respect for the organizational autonomy of political parties. Finally, the study can provide a foundation for future research on party organization, leadership personalization, democratic consolidation, and electoral politics in Pakistan.

The study is geographically limited to Pakistan and focuses on the period 2008–2025. This period is selected because it encompasses four major general-election cycles and important transformations in Pakistan's party system. The analysis is restricted to three major parties: PPP, PML-N, and PTI. The study specifically examines leadership selection, internal party elections, candidate selection, policy-making, party membership and participation, organizational structures, leadership centralization, leadership succession, and internal accountability. It focuses on intra-party organization rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of each party's electoral performance, ideology, or public policy record. The study therefore seeks to determine how internal democratic practices influence the institutionalization and organizational autonomy of Pakistan's major political parties.

Literature Review

Political parties constitute one of the principal institutions through which citizens participate in democratic politics. They recruit political leaders, aggregate social interests, formulate policies, nominate candidates, and compete for governmental power. Consequently, the internal organization of political parties has significant implications for the quality of democracy beyond the electoral process itself. Intra-party democracy refers broadly to the extent to which ordinary party members and organizational bodies participate in important party decisions, including leadership selection, candidate nomination, policy formulation, and internal accountability. However, scholars caution that intra-party democracy is not a single or universally defined organizational model. Different parties may distribute internal authority in different ways while still claiming to provide democratic participation (Cross & Katz, 2013).

Scarrow (2005) argues that intra-party democracy can involve several dimensions of participation, including opportunities for ordinary members to influence party leadership, policy development, candidate selection, and organizational decisions. Internal elections are therefore an important but not sufficient indicator of Democratic Party organization. A party may conduct formal leadership elections while simultaneously maintaining highly centralized decision-making structures. Consequently, meaningful intra-party democracy requires examining not only whether elections occur but also who participates, who has the power to make decisions, how competitive internal processes are, and whether party leaders are accountable to members.

Leadership competition represents another important dimension. Democratic Party organization requires mechanisms through which leaders can be selected, challenged, and replaced. Cross (2013) emphasizes that leadership selection is among the most consequential decisions within political parties because the size and composition of the leadership selectorate influence the distribution of power between party activists and political leaders. Where leadership selection is restricted to a narrow organizational elite, the authority of ordinary members may remain limited. Conversely, broader participation can increase members' influence over party leadership, although it does not automatically guarantee effective internal democracy.

Candidate selection is similarly significant. Political parties perform a gatekeeping function by determining which individuals obtain access to electoral competition. Rahat and Hazan (2001) demonstrate that candidate-selection procedures can vary according to the size of the selectorate, ranging from centralized party elites to ordinary party members. More inclusive selection procedures can enhance participation, but centralized selection may allow party leaders to maintain greater organizational control. Therefore, candidate selection provides an important indicator for evaluating the actual distribution of authority within political parties.

Policy participation and internal accountability further distinguish substantive intra-party democracy from formal organizational procedures. Members may possess nominal rights to participate while having limited influence over party policy. Likewise, party executives may be formally elected but remain largely unaccountable to ordinary members. Katz and Mair (1995) argue that the organizational development of modern political parties can produce tensions between party leadership and membership, particularly when professionalized party organizations become increasingly dependent on leadership structures and state resources. Thus, the study of intra-party democracy requires attention to both formal rules and actual practices.

Cross and Katz (2013) further emphasize that intra-party democracy involves choices concerning the distribution of internal power rather than a universally applicable institutional formula. Expanding participation may improve inclusiveness but can also create tensions concerning party unity, leadership effectiveness, and organizational efficiency. Therefore, in the Pakistani context, intra-party democracy should be assessed through multiple indicators, including internal elections, leadership competition, candidate selection, member participation, policy formulation, accountability, and transparency.

Political party institutionalization refers to the development of stable, autonomous, and routinized organizational structures and practices through which political parties operate over time. Institutionalized parties are not dependent exclusively on individual leaders because their organizational procedures, values, and structures possess a degree of continuity beyond particular personalities. Huntington (1968) broadly associated institutionalization with the development of stable and valued political organizations whose procedures become established and predictable.

Within the literature on political parties, Randall and Svåsand (2002) provide an especially useful framework for understanding party institutionalization. They identify four dimensions: systemness, value infusion, autonomy, and reification. Systemness concerns the extent to which party organizations develop coherent and interconnected structures. Value infusion refers to the degree to which party members and supporters identify with the party as an institution rather than merely with individual leaders. Autonomy concerns the extent to which the party is capable of making decisions independently of external forces. Reification refers to the extent to which the party becomes established and recognized as a legitimate and durable political organization within society.

These dimensions are particularly relevant to Pakistan because political parties may possess extensive electoral support without necessarily developing equally strong internal institutions. A party may repeatedly win elections but remain heavily dependent on individual personalities, families, or small leadership groups. Such a condition raises questions about whether electoral success necessarily corresponds to organizational institutionalization.

Institutionalization is also closely related to organizational stability and behavioral routinization. Levitsky (1998) warns against treating institutionalization as a single phenomenon because different dimensions can develop unevenly. His analysis distinguishes between concepts such as value infusion and behavioral routinization, demonstrating that a party may possess strong symbolic or organizational attachment while still lacking stable and predictable internal procedures. This distinction is important for analyzing Pakistani parties because long-standing political organizations may have strong social identities while simultaneously relying on personalized leadership.

Panebianco (1988) similarly emphasizes the importance of organizational development, leadership structures, and the historical processes through which parties become established. Party institutionalization therefore involves more than simply surviving successive elections. It requires the development of organizational procedures that can operate with some degree of continuity and autonomy.

Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes political party institutionalization as the extent to which PPP, PML-N, and PTI possess stable organizational structures, routinized decision-making procedures, organizational autonomy, internal continuity, and institutionalized leadership succession. This conceptualization allows the study to distinguish institutionalized party structures from personalized forms of political organization.

Political party institutionalization is closely connected with democratic consolidation because political parties serve as intermediaries between citizens and state institutions. Mainwaring and Scully (1995) argue that stable and institutionalized party systems contribute to democratic governance by providing predictable channels for political competition, representation, and political accountability. Where parties remain weakly institutionalized, political competition can become highly personalized and unpredictable. Huntington (1968) similarly emphasizes the importance of institutional development for political stability. Political institutions become stronger when organizations develop procedures and structures that can withstand changes in individual leadership. From this perspective, parties that depend heavily on individual leaders may experience difficulties when leadership changes, internal conflicts emerge, or political circumstances shift. Weak institutionalization can

also encourage factionalism and organizational instability. When internal rules are weakly enforced, political actors may compete through personal networks rather than institutional mechanisms. This can reduce the importance of formal party structures and increase the influence of political elites. Levitsky (1998) demonstrates that institutionalization should therefore be assessed through actual patterns of organizational behavior rather than simply through the existence of formal party rules.

Leadership succession provides a particularly useful test of institutionalization. A highly institutionalized party should possess mechanisms through which leadership can change without threatening the party's organizational survival. Conversely, when leadership succession depends heavily on family inheritance, personal loyalty, or the authority of a dominant political figure, organizational autonomy may be constrained. In this respect, intra-party democracy and party institutionalization are closely connected. Competitive internal elections, transparent candidate selection, member participation, and leadership accountability can contribute to organizational institutionalization by strengthening formal procedures and reducing excessive dependence on individual leaders. Conversely, centralized decision-making and weak internal accountability can reinforce personalization and weaken institutional autonomy.

Leadership personalization represents one of the most important challenges to institutional party development. A distinction can be made between leader-centered parties**,** in which organizational authority is concentrated around an individual or small leadership group, and institution-centered parties, in which decision-making is more strongly embedded within established organizational institutions and procedures. Michels' (1962) classical formulation of the Iron Law of Oligarchy provides an important theoretical basis for understanding this problem. Michels argued that large organizations tend toward oligarchic structures because organizational complexity, specialization, and leadership expertise allow a small group of leaders to accumulate power. Although developed in the context of European socialist organizations, this argument remains useful for examining the tension between formal democratic participation and concentrated organizational authority. Panebianco (1988) similarly emphasizes the importance of organizational leadership and internal power relations in shaping party development. Political parties do not operate as neutral administrative organizations; rather, leaders and organizational elites possess resources and strategic advantages that can influence party structures. Katz and Mair (1995) also demonstrate that party organizations can develop organizational structures in which leadership becomes increasingly autonomous from ordinary members. This can produce a gap between formal membership participation and actual decision-making authority.

Harmel and Janda (1994) further emphasize that political parties possess multiple goals and organizational interests that can influence their development and adaptation. Leadership groups may therefore prioritize electoral survival, organizational control, or policy objectives in ways that affect internal democratic arrangements. For the Pakistani case, leadership personalization is particularly relevant because the three parties examined in this study—PPP, PML-N, and PTI—have developed around influential leadership figures and political networks. The analytical task, however, is not to assume that all three parties exhibit identical forms of personalization. Instead, the study examines how leadership authority is organized, how members participate in decision-making, and whether formal institutions possess meaningful autonomy from dominant leadership groups**.**

The literature on South Asian political parties indicates that formal democratic competition does not necessarily translate into strong internal party democracy. Political parties in the region frequently combine electoral mobilization with centralized leadership structures, patron-client relationships, political families, and elite-controlled candidate selection. Pakistan provides an important case because its democratic development has been shaped by periods of military intervention, civilian governments,

institutional instability, and highly competitive electoral politics. These historical conditions have affected the development of political parties and their organizational structures. Comparable patterns can also be observed elsewhere in South Asia, although the institutional characteristics differ across countries. In India, for example, political parties vary significantly in their internal organizational structures, with some parties demonstrating relatively centralized leadership while others maintain more competitive organizational mechanisms. Bangladesh has similarly experienced strong personalization and leadership-centered party competition. The South Asian experience therefore demonstrates that electoral competition and intra-party democracy should be treated as analytically distinct concepts. A party can compete successfully in national elections while maintaining limited internal participation. This distinction is central to the present study because it prevents democratic performance from being measured solely through electoral outcomes.

Pakistan's political party system has developed through a complex interaction between electoral politics, political leadership, family networks, ideological movements, institutional intervention, and changing patterns of voter mobilization. Major parties such as PPP, PML-N, and PTI have played significant roles in national politics, but their organizational structures and leadership arrangements differ considerably. The PPP has historically developed a strong political identity around the Bhutto political legacy. Its organizational development therefore provides an important case for examining the relationship between political inheritance, party identity, and institutional continuity. The party's longevity demonstrates significant organizational resilience, while the role of political family leadership raises questions concerning the relationship between institutionalization and personalization.

The PML-**N** provides another important case because of the central role played by the Sharif political family in the party's leadership and electoral politics. The party's development illustrates how political leadership, organizational structures, and family-based political succession can interact. The PTI provides a particularly valuable comparative case because its development differs historically from that of PPP and PML-N. PTI emerged as a major electoral force under the leadership of Imran Khan and developed a strong leader-centered political identity. Recent research specifically examining PTI's internal democracy identifies centralized leadership, limited member participation, and weak internal accountability as important areas of concern (Riaz et al., 2025).

The broader literature also suggests that Pakistani political parties have faced recurring problems involving personalization, dynastic politics, organizational weakness, and limited internal democracy. Recent research argues that political parties have simultaneously contributed to democratic continuity while retaining organizational characteristics that constrain internal democracy (Mohani et al., 2026). However, these characteristics should not be treated as identical across all parties. PPP, PML-N, and PTI have different historical origins, organizational structures, ideological traditions, electoral bases, and leadership arrangements. A comparative approach is therefore necessary to determine whether similar institutional problems emerge through different organizational pathways.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides substantial insight into political parties, party systems, leadership, electoral competition, and democratic development. The literature on intra-party democracy has also developed significantly, particularly regarding leadership selection, candidate selection, membership participation, and the distribution of organizational power (Cross & Katz, 2013; Scarrow, 2005). However, relatively limited comparative research has systematically connected intra-party democracy with political party institutionalization in the Pakistani context.

Much of the existing literature examines Pakistani political parties through electoral competition, political leadership, dynastic politics, party ideology, governance, or broader democratic development. Studies specifically examining intra-party democracy often focus on individual parties

or particular organizational dimensions. For example, recent research on PTI examines internal democracy through the perspectives of oligarchy and party institutionalization, identifying centralized leadership and limited member participation as significant challenges (Riaz et al., 2025).

A further gap concerns the comparative and longitudinal dimension. There is value in examining PPP, PML-N, and PTI together across 2008–2025, a period encompassing several general elections, changes in government, major leadership transitions, and substantial transformations in Pakistan's party competition. Such an approach makes it possible to identify both similarities and differences in the institutional development of major political parties.

This study addresses this gap by examining intra-party democracy through multiple dimensions leadership selection, internal elections, candidate selection, member participation, policy-making, internal accountability, organizational autonomy, and leadership succession and connecting these dimensions to party institutionalization. Drawing on party institutionalization theory, the Iron Law of Oligarchy, and elite-centered approaches to political organization, the study seeks to determine whether formal democratic structures within Pakistani political parties translate into meaningful internal participation and institutional autonomy.

The study therefore moves beyond the question of whether Pakistani political parties hold internal elections and instead asks a broader question: to what extent do internal democratic practices contribute to the development of autonomous, stable, and institutionalized political party organizations? This approach provides a more comprehensive basis for comparing PPP, PML-N, and PTI and contributes to the wider literature on Democratic Party organization in emerging democracies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides the analytical foundation for examining the relationship between intra-party democracy and political party institutionalization in Pakistan. Political parties are not simply electoral organizations; they are institutions through which political leadership is recruited, policies are formulated, candidates are selected, and political participation is organized. Consequently, the internal distribution of power within political parties can have important implications for their organizational development and democratic performance. This study employs three complementary theoretical perspectives: Party Institutionalization Theory, Robert Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy, and Elite Theory. Party Institutionalization Theory provides the principal framework for evaluating the organizational development of Pakistan's major political parties, while Michels' theory explains the tendency toward concentration of organizational power. Elite Theory further helps explain how political elites influence leadership selection, candidate nomination, and decision-making processes. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional framework for comparing the Pakistan PPP, PML-N, and PTI during 2008–2025.

Party Institutionalization Theory

Party Institutionalization Theory constitutes the primary theoretical framework of this study. Institutionalization generally refers to the process through which organizations develop stable structures, established procedures, organizational continuity, and a degree of autonomy from individual actors. Huntington (1968) associated institutionalization with the development of organizations and procedures that acquire stability and value. In the study of political parties, Randall and Svåsand (2002) provide a particularly useful framework by conceptualizing party institutionalization through four dimensions: systemness, value infusion, autonomy, and reification.

Systemness

Systemness refers to the extent to which a political party possesses coherent, interconnected, and routinized organizational structures. An institutionally developed party should have functioning central and local organizations,

regular decision-making procedures, internal committees, membership structures, and established mechanisms for leadership selection. Systemness therefore allows the researcher to assess whether party organization extends beyond a small group of political leaders. In the Pakistani context, systemness can be examined by comparing the organizational structures of PPP, PML-N, and PTI. The analysis can consider whether these parties possess functioning local branches, party committees, regular internal elections, and established mechanisms for communicating decisions between central and grassroots levels. A party with highly developed organizational structures is theoretically more likely to sustain itself beyond the influence of individual leaders.

Value Infusion

Value infusion refers to the extent to which party members and supporters identify with the political party as an institution rather than simply with a particular leader or political family (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). This dimension is particularly important for examining leader-centered politics. Where party supporters primarily identify with a political personality, the organization may become dependent on that individual's popularity and authority. Conversely, when members develop a strong attachment to party ideology, organizational identity, and institutional values, the party may demonstrate greater institutional resilience. For PPP, PML-N, and PTI, value infusion can therefore be examined by assessing whether political loyalty is primarily directed toward the party organization and its ideological principles or toward dominant leadership figures. This distinction is especially important in understanding the relationship between political personalization and institutionalization.

Autonomy

Autonomy refers to the extent to which a political party is capable of making organizational decisions independently of external actors and dominant individual interests (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). An autonomous party should possess internal institutions capable of determining leadership, candidate selection, policy priorities, and organizational strategies without excessive control from a single leader, family, patron, or external political actor. In this study, autonomy is particularly relevant to the analysis of candidate selection, leadership selection, and policy-making. If these decisions are primarily controlled by a small leadership group, the formal organizational structure of a party may exist without possessing substantial institutional autonomy.

Reification

Reification refers to the extent to which a political party becomes established and recognized as a legitimate and durable political organization within society (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). A highly reified party possesses a recognizable organizational identity and is perceived by citizens as a continuing political institution rather than merely as an electoral vehicle for individual politicians. The three parties in this study provide useful cases for examining reification because PPP, PML-N, and PTI have developed distinctive political identities and substantial electoral constituencies. However, societal recognition alone does not necessarily demonstrate strong internal institutionalization. Therefore, reification must be considered alongside systemness, value infusion, and autonomy. Taken together, these four dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating the institutional development of PPP, PML-N, and PTI. The framework also allows the study to distinguish between electoral success and organizational institutionalization. A party can possess considerable electoral support while still maintaining weak internal democratic institutions.

Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy

The second theoretical perspective is Robert Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy. Originally developed in *Political Parties*, Michels (1962) argued that large organizations tend toward oligarchic structures because organizational complexity creates a need for specialized leadership and bureaucracy. As organizations become larger, leaders acquire expertise,

information, organizational resources, and control over decision-making processes. Consequently, power may become concentrated within a relatively small leadership group even when the organization formally operates according to democratic principles. Michels' argument is particularly relevant to intra-party democracy because political parties may formally establish internal elections and participatory structures while decision-making remains concentrated among senior leaders. The theory therefore helps explain the possible gap between formal intra-party democracy and substantive intra-party democracy.

In Pakistan, the Iron Law of Oligarchy can be applied to several dimensions of party organization. Leadership concentration can be examined by assessing whether authority is distributed across party institutions or concentrated around dominant political personalities. Elite control can be assessed through candidate selection and organizational decision-making. Centralized decision-making can be examined by determining the influence of party leaders over policy and organizational decisions. Similarly, grassroots participation can be assessed by examining the actual influence of ordinary members in party affairs.

The theory is also relevant to leadership succession. If established procedures for replacing leaders exist but leadership transitions remain highly dependent on particular individuals, families, or elite networks, this may indicate oligarchic tendencies within the organization. Michels' theory therefore complements Party Institutionalization Theory by explaining why organizational structures may remain formally democratic while actual authority becomes concentrated.

Elite Theory

The third perspective is Elite Theory, associated with classical scholars including Mosca, Pareto, and Mills. Elite theorists generally emphasize the concentration of political power among relatively small groups that possess greater access to organizational, economic, social, or political resources (Mills, 1956; Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1966).

Mosca (1939) argued that organized minorities tend to exercise power over larger but less organized populations. Pareto (1966) similarly focused on the circulation and persistence of elites, while Mills (1956) emphasized the concentration of decision-making power among interconnected elites.

Elite Theory provides a useful framework for analyzing Pakistani political parties because it draws attention to the role of political families, senior party leaders, influential candidates, organizational elites, and resource-rich political actors. These groups may exercise disproportionate influence over candidate selection, leadership positions, organizational decisions, and access to political resources.

The theory therefore complements Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy. While Michels explains the organizational tendency toward concentrated leadership, Elite Theory helps identify which groups possess and exercise that power. In the present study, this perspective will be used to examine whether political decision-making within PPP, PML-N, and PTI is broadly participatory or disproportionately controlled by established political elites.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to examine the relationship between intra-party democracy and political party institutionalization in Pakistan, focusing on the PPP, PML-N, and PTI) during the period 2008–2025. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand organizational structures, leadership practices, internal decision-making processes, and patterns of political participation rather than measure intra-party democracy solely through numerical indicators. Comparative analysis enables the study to identify similarities and differences among the three major political parties and assess how their organizational characteristics have developed over time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The three parties have been selected purposively because of their national political significance, electoral

relevance, organizational histories, and differing patterns of leadership and party development. The PPP represents one of Pakistan's longest-standing major political parties and has played an important role in the country's democratic and electoral politics. The PML-N is selected because of its sustained role in national government and its significant influence on Pakistan's electoral competition and political leadership. PTI is included because of its emergence as a major contemporary electoral force and its distinctive pattern of leader-centered political mobilization. Together, these cases provide a useful basis for comparing different forms of political party organization and leadership. The study relies primarily on documentary and qualitative data. Primary and official sources include party constitutions, intra-party election records, party manifestos, organizational documents, statements by party leaders, and relevant materials published by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, scholarly research reports, reputable think-tank publications, and newspaper archives. These sources are examined to establish evidence concerning party structures, leadership selection, internal elections, candidate nomination, policy-making, member participation, and leadership succession. The collected material is analyzed through qualitative content analysis, allowing recurring themes and organizational patterns to be identified systematically (Krippendorff, 2018). Comparative analysis is then used to evaluate the three parties according to eight analytical dimensions: leadership selection, internal elections, candidate selection, policy-making, member participation, internal accountability, organizational autonomy, and leadership succession. Each dimension is examined in terms of whether decision-making is primarily competitive or centralized, regular or irregular, decentralized or leader-controlled, member-led or leader-led, strong or weak, and institutional or personalized. The analysis is guided by Party Institutionalization Theory, Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy, and Elite Theory. Rather than assuming that formal party constitutions automatically demonstrate intra-party democracy, the study distinguishes between formal institutional arrangements and their practical implementation. This approach enables the research to assess whether the existence of internal democratic procedures translates into meaningful participation, organizational autonomy, and institutionalized party structures. The comparative findings are subsequently interpreted in relation to the central proposition that greater intra-party democracy contributes to stronger party institutionalization, whereas excessive leadership centralization and elite domination can weaken organizational autonomy and democratic development.

Political Parties and Intra-Party Democracy in Pakistan

Democratic Transition after 2008

Pakistan's political development between 2008 and 2025 provides an important period for examining the relationship between electoral competition, intra-party democracy, and political party institutionalization. The 2008 general elections marked the beginning of a new phase of civilian rule following the Musharraf period. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) documented the election results, party positions, voter participation, and parliamentary representation across the National and Provincial Assemblies (Election Commission of Pakistan [ECP], 2008). The 2013 general elections represented another important stage in Pakistan's democratic development. Held on May 11, 2013, the election produced a new parliamentary configuration and continued the process of electoral competition among the PPP, PML-N, PTI, and other political parties (ECP, 2013). The 2018 general elections further transformed the party system, particularly through the emergence of PTI as a major national electoral force. The official ECP election records provide detailed results and returned-candidate information for the 2018 elections (ECP, 2018). The 2024 general elections produced another significant transformation in the competitive environment. The election was conducted on February 8, 2024, and the ECP subsequently published provisional and final electoral documentation, including

National and Provincial Assembly results (ECP, 2024). The period 2008–2025 is therefore analytically important because it covers four consecutive general-election cycles and encompasses changes in governing parties, the continued importance of PPP and PML-N, the rise of PTI, and significant controversies surrounding internal party organization. Importantly, electoral competition should not automatically be equated with intra-party democracy. A party can participate successfully in competitive elections while maintaining centralized leadership, limited internal competition, or weak mechanisms for member participation. The present study therefore examines whether the development of competitive electoral politics during this period was accompanied by corresponding institutional development within the major political parties.

Legal and Institutional Framework

The legal and institutional framework governing political parties provides an important basis for evaluating intra-party democracy in Pakistan. Article 17 of the Constitution of Pakistan recognizes citizens' right to form or become members of political parties, subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law. This constitutional principle is supplemented by legislation regulating the organization and functioning of political parties. The Elections Act, 2017 provides particularly important requirements concerning internal party organization. Section 207 requires political parties to maintain elected general councils at the federal, provincial, and local levels where applicable and to convene general meetings at least once each year (ECP, 2017).

Section 208 requires party office-bearers to be elected periodically according to the party constitution, with no more than five years between two elections. It also provides that party members should have an equal opportunity to contest party offices, subject to the relevant party constitution (ECP, 2017). The Election Rules, 2017 further establish procedural requirements for intra-party elections. Political parties are required to provide the ECP with an election schedule before conducting their intra-party elections and subsequently submit a certificate confirming that the elections were conducted according to the party constitution and the Elections Act (ECP, 2017). These provisions demonstrate that intra-party elections are not merely voluntary organizational practices but form part of the legal framework regulating political parties. However, an important distinction must be made between legal compliance and substantive intra-party democracy**.** Conducting an election and submitting the required certificate demonstrate procedural compliance, but they do not necessarily establish that ordinary members had meaningful choices, that competition was genuine, or that elected institutions exercise independent authority. Consequently, this study evaluates not only whether parties conduct internal elections but also whether their organizational structures provide meaningful opportunities for participation, leadership competition, accountability, and decentralized decision-making. The ECP's continuing involvement in intra-party election disputes further illustrates the importance of this distinction. In the case of PTI, for example, the ECP published multiple orders concerning the party's intra-party elections during 2024 and 2025, demonstrating that compliance with the statutory framework can become subject to institutional scrutiny and dispute (ECP, 2024–2025).

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)

The PPP represents one of Pakistan's most historically significant political organizations and provides an important case for examining the relationship between party continuity, political leadership, and intra-party institutionalization. Established in 1967, the party has participated extensively in Pakistan's electoral and parliamentary politics and has experienced periods of government and opposition. Its political identity has historically been associated with the Bhutto political legacy, particularly the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto, followed by the continued prominence of the Bhutto-Zardari family. This historical continuity provides evidence of organizational resilience, but it also raises questions concerning the balance between institutional structures and personalized

leadership. The official constitution of the PPP provides a formal organizational framework governing the party's institutional arrangements and leadership structure (Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians, n.d.). From the perspective of intra-party democracy, the important issue is therefore not simply whether PPP possesses formal organizational bodies but whether these bodies possess meaningful authority in relation to influential political leaders and established political networks. Leadership succession is particularly significant in this regard. The continuing political importance of the Bhutto-Zardari family suggests that political inheritance and party identity remain closely connected. However, this should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that all decision-making is controlled by the family. Rather, the relationship between family leadership, party institutions, elected office-bearers, and grassroots members requires empirical examination. Candidate selection represents another important dimension. Decisions concerning electoral candidates can reveal the extent to which authority is distributed between local party structures and central leadership. Similarly, the participation of party workers and members in policy formulation and organizational decisions provides an important indicator of substantive intra-party democracy. From the perspective of Randall and Svåsand's (2002) institutionalization framework, PPP can be examined in terms of its systemness, given its long organizational history; value infusion, given the strength of its political identity; autonomy, concerning the relationship between party institutions and influential political actors; and reification, reflected in its enduring recognition as a major political institution. The PPP case therefore illustrates the analytical importance of distinguishing organizational longevity from the degree of internal democratic institutionalization.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)

The PML-N provides a second major case for examining leadership centralization, organizational hierarchy, and intra-party institutionalization. PML-N has been one of Pakistan's principal electoral parties since the late 1980s and has played a major role in federal and provincial politics. Its organizational and electoral development has been strongly associated with Nawaz Sharif and the broader Sharif political family. At the same time, the party maintains formal organizational institutions and procedures for internal elections. The PML-N Constitution, revised in May 2024, provides that party elections should be conducted at central, provincial, and local levels according to democratic and transparent principles. It specifies a four-year term for party elections and establishes a Central Election Commission responsible for organizing and conducting national-level party elections (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz [PML-N], 2024). These formal provisions demonstrate that the party possesses an institutional framework intended to facilitate internal participation and leadership selection. Nevertheless, formal organizational rules do not necessarily determine how political authority is distributed in practice. The continued importance of Nawaz Sharif and the Sharif family makes leadership personalization a significant variable for analysis. The role of senior party elites in candidate selection, organizational appointments, and policy decisions is similarly relevant to assessing the extent of internal participation. PML-N's political trajectory during 2008–2025 also demonstrates considerable organizational resilience. The party participated in the 2008 elections, became the dominant federal governing party following the 2013 elections, experienced a period of opposition following the 2018 elections, and returned to a central governing position following the 2024 elections (ECP, 2008, 2013, 2018, 2024). This electoral continuity demonstrates organizational capacity but does not by itself establish substantive intra-party democracy. The PML-N case therefore requires an assessment of whether formal party institutions operate independently of dominant leadership and whether ordinary members possess meaningful opportunities to influence leadership, candidate selection, and organizational decisions. In terms of Randall and Svåsand's (2002) framework, the party's organizational continuity and societal recognition can be examined

alongside the degree of autonomy and value infusion within its organizational structures.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)

PTI provides a particularly valuable case because its organizational development differs from the longer institutional histories of PPP and PML-N. Founded in 1996, PTI initially remained a relatively small political organization but subsequently developed into a major national electoral force, particularly during the 2010s. Its political mobilization was strongly associated with Imran Khan and emphasized themes including political reform, anti-corruption, and opposition to established political elites. PTI's development therefore provides an opportunity to examine whether a movement characterized by strong leader-centered mobilization can develop autonomous and durable party institutions. The party conducted a major intra-party election process during 2012–2013, which was presented as an effort to establish a broader organizational structure and internal participation. However, the subsequent development of PTI raises questions about the durability and autonomy of these internal mechanisms. These questions became particularly significant after 2022 as the party faced major political and organizational challenges. The ECP's official record concerning PTI's intra-party elections notes that the party's previous intra-party election had been held on June 13, 2017, and that subsequent intra-party elections became subject to statutory requirements under Section 208 of the Elections Act, 2017 (ECP, 2023).

Subsequently, intra-party elections were conducted in March 2024, but the process became the subject of complaints and institutional proceedings. The ECP's published orders concerning PTI's intra-party elections show that the Commission considered issues relating to the conduct and validity of the party's internal electoral process (ECP, 2024–2025). This episode is particularly relevant to the distinction between formal and substantive intra-party democracy. The existence of an internal election does not necessarily demonstrate that members possess meaningful influence over leadership or that organizational institutions are autonomous. PTI's organizational experience can therefore be examined through Michels' (1962) argument concerning the tendency of organizations toward concentrated leadership and Randall and Svåsand's (2002) dimensions of systemness and autonomy. At the same time, PTI's substantial electoral mobilization and organizational expansion demonstrate that strong leadership and institutional development are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The central analytical question is therefore whether PTI has been able to convert leader-centered political mobilization into durable organizational institutions capable of functioning independently of the dominant leadership. Its experience between 2022 and 2025 makes this question particularly significant for understanding the relationship between political leadership, intra-party democracy, and party institutionalization in Pakistan.

Comparative Analysis of PPP, PML-N, and PTI

The comparative analysis of the PPP, PML-N, and PTI provides an opportunity to assess how intra-party democratic practices influence political party institutionalization in Pakistan. Although all three parties possess formal organizational structures and participate in electoral politics, they differ in historical development, leadership arrangements, organizational practices, and relationships between party elites and grassroots members. The comparison focuses on leadership selection, internal party elections, candidate selection, policy-making, leadership succession, and organizational autonomy. These dimensions are derived from the broader literature on intra-party democracy and party institutionalization (Cross & Katz, 2013; Randall & Svåsand, 2002; Scarrow, 2005). The analysis does not assume that formal democratic procedures necessarily produce substantive internal democracy. Instead, it distinguishes between the existence of organizational rules and the actual distribution of decision-making power within each party.

Leadership Selection

Leadership selection represents one of the most important indicators of intra-party democracy

because it determines who controls organizational resources and political decision-making. Democratic Party organization requires meaningful opportunities for members or representative party bodies to select and replace leaders, whereas highly centralized systems tend to concentrate authority within a small leadership group (Cross, 2013; Scarrow, 2005). The three Pakistani parties examined in this study possess formal procedures for selecting party office-bearers, but the relationship between formal procedures and actual political influence varies.

In the case of **PPP**, leadership has historically been strongly associated with the Bhutto political family. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto played central roles in shaping the party's identity, while subsequent leadership has remained closely connected to the Bhutto-Zardari political lineage. The persistence of this leadership tradition has contributed to organizational continuity and a recognizable party identity. At the same time, it raises questions concerning the degree to which leadership selection is institutionally autonomous from influential political families. From the perspective of Michels' (1962) Iron Law of Oligarchy, long-term concentration of organizational authority around a limited leadership group may create conditions in which formal democratic procedures coexist with substantial elite influence.

PML-N similarly demonstrates a strong association between party leadership and the Sharif political family. Nawaz Sharif has remained an exceptionally influential figure within the party, while other members of the Sharif family have occupied important political positions. The party constitution provides formal mechanisms for electing party office-bearers and establishes a Central Election Commission for internal elections PML-N, 2024). However, the existence of these procedures does not by itself establish that leadership competition is fully independent of dominant political actors. The continued importance of the Sharif family suggests that leadership legitimacy and organizational authority remain closely connected to established political leadership.

PTI presents a somewhat different but related pattern. The party's organizational development has been closely associated with Imran Khan, whose leadership has played a central role in PTI's political identity and electoral mobilization. PTI's internal elections demonstrate an effort to create formal mechanisms of leadership selection, particularly during the party's organizational reforms in the early 2010s. Nevertheless, subsequent organizational controversies indicate tensions between formal internal elections and the concentration of political authority around the party's dominant leader. The ECP's proceedings concerning PTI's intra-party elections demonstrate that internal leadership selection became a significant institutional issue during 2023–2024 (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2024).

Internal Party Elections

Internal party elections provide a formal mechanism for promoting intra-party democracy. The Elections Act, 2017 requires political parties to conduct periodic elections for party office-bearers and provides members with opportunities to contest party offices according to party constitutions (ECP, 2017). However, the frequency and formal existence of elections do not necessarily indicate the degree of substantive internal democracy.

PPP has maintained formal organizational mechanisms for internal elections through its party constitution and organizational structure (Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians, n.d.). The party's long institutional history provides evidence of organizational continuity. Nevertheless, the continued prominence of its established leadership raises the question of whether internal elections generate significant leadership competition or primarily formalize existing power relationships.

PML-N similarly provides for internal elections in its party constitution. The 2024 revised constitution states that party elections should be conducted at different organizational levels and provides for a Central Election Commission to administer the process (PML-N, 2024). This represents an institutional mechanism for internal accountability. Yet, as Cross and Katz (2013)

emphasize, the democratic quality of party elections depends not simply on whether elections take place but also on the inclusiveness of the selectorate, competitiveness of contests, and distribution of organizational authority.

PTI offers an especially important case. The party conducted extensive intra-party elections during 2012–2013, seeking to establish a nationwide organizational structure. However, the subsequent gap between internal elections and later organizational requirements became significant. The ECP noted that PTI's previous intra-party election had been held in June 2017 and subsequently scrutinized the party's compliance with the legal requirements for new intra-party elections (ECP, 2023). PTI conducted another intra-party election in March 2024, but the process was subsequently subjected to complaints and ECP proceedings (ECP, 2024).

Candidate Selection

Candidate selection is another critical dimension because parties act as gatekeepers to elected political office. Rahat and Hazan (2001) demonstrate that candidate-selection methods vary according to the size and composition of the selectorate. Where candidates are selected by a broad membership, internal participation tends to be greater; where selection is concentrated among party leaders, organizational authority becomes more centralized. In PPP, candidate selection involves interaction between central party leadership, provincial organizations, and local political actors. However, the importance of senior political leadership and established political networks can limit the autonomy of grassroots structures. In PML-N, candidate selection has similarly involved a combination of central party decision-making and local political considerations. The influence of senior leadership and established political elites remains particularly relevant because electoral candidates can provide resources, networks, and political support for the party.

PTI's candidate-selection experience illustrates the tensions between grassroots participation and centralized leadership. While the party has promoted organizational participation, its political mobilization has remained strongly associated with Imran Khan. Consequently, the extent to which local party organizations can independently influence candidate selection is an important indicator of its organizational autonomy. The three cases therefore suggest that candidate selection represents an area in which formal decentralization may coexist with substantial central leadership influence. This supports Rahat and Hazan's (2001) argument that the selectorate is a key determinant of internal party power distribution.

Policy-Making

Policy-making provides another important measure of intra-party democracy. Democratic parties should provide opportunities for members, party representatives, parliamentary groups, and organizational bodies to contribute to policy development. However, political leaders inevitably play important roles in determining electoral strategies and policy priorities. In PPP, policy-making has historically been connected with the party's ideological identity and leadership. The party possesses formal organizational bodies, but the influence of senior leadership remains an important factor in strategic decisions. PML-N similarly maintains formal party structures, including central and provincial organizational bodies, but major political decisions have frequently been associated with senior leadership. PTI presents a particularly significant case because its political identity has been strongly linked with Imran Khan's leadership and the movement's reform-oriented political narrative. This can facilitate strong electoral mobilization but may also increase dependence on centralized leadership in determining strategic priorities. Katz and Mair (1995) argue that modern party organizations can experience increasing separation between party leadership and ordinary membership. This distinction is useful for the Pakistani cases because the existence of party conventions, executive committees, and organizational councils does not necessarily establish that these bodies exercise independent influence over policy.Consequently, the central question is not whether party institutions

participate formally in policy-making but how much influence they possess compared with dominant political leaders and senior party elites.

6.5 Leadership Succession

Leadership succession is particularly useful for evaluating party institutionalization because it demonstrates whether an organization can transfer authority through established procedures rather than through personal or familial relationships. Randall and Svåsand (2002) emphasize organizational continuity and autonomy as important dimensions of institutionalization. In PPP, leadership succession has been closely connected to the Bhutto-Zardari family. This has provided continuity and contributed to the party's distinctive political identity, but it also raises questions concerning the degree of institutional autonomy in leadership selection.

PML-N similarly demonstrates strong family-centered leadership continuity. The continuing importance of Nawaz Sharif and the wider Sharif family suggests that political leadership and family networks remain highly influential in determining the party's organizational direction. PTI presents a different but equally significant pattern. Rather than a traditional dynastic succession structure, its organizational development has centered heavily on Imran Khan as the party's dominant political leader. This creates a different form of personalization: authority is concentrated around a highly influential individual rather than being transferred through an established family succession system.

Thus, while the mechanisms differ, all three parties raise questions concerning the extent to which leadership succession has become fully institutionalized. The comparison demonstrates that personalization can take different forms dynastic in some cases and leader-centered in others. This distinction is important because party institutionalization should not be reduced to the absence or presence of political families alone.

Organizational Autonomy

Organizational autonomy is central to Randall and Svåsand's (2002) theory of party institutionalization. It concerns whether party organizations can make decisions independently of individual leaders, external actors, or powerful social networks. A party may have a constitution, executive committee, local branches, and internal elections while still possessing limited autonomy if these institutions remain subordinate to dominant political leaders. PPP's organizational autonomy must therefore be assessed against the influence of the Bhutto-Zardari leadership tradition. PML-N's autonomy must similarly be evaluated in relation to the influence of the Sharif family. PTI presents a different organizational challenge because its institutions have developed around a powerful individual leadership structure associated with Imran Khan. Michels' (1962) theory helps explain why formal organizational structures may fail to produce decentralized authority. As organizations become larger and more complex, specialized leaders and organizational elites can accumulate information and resources that strengthen their control. Elite Theory further suggests that political actors with greater organizational and material resources are likely to possess greater influence over internal decisions (Mosca, 1939; Mills, 1956; Pareto, 1966).

6.7 Comparative Assessment

The comparative evidence can be summarized through the following analytical framework. The categories represent provisional analytical assessments based on the dimensions examined above, rather than predetermined conclusions.

Table 6.1: Comparative Assessment of PPP, PML-N and PTI

Dimension	PPP	PML-N	PTI
Leadership centralization	High	High	High
Internal elections	Formal and periodic	Formal and periodic	Formal, but contested/periodic
Candidate selection	Central + local influence	Central + local influence	Strong central influence
Member participation	Limited–moderate	Limited	Limited–moderate
Leadership succession	Strong family influence	Strong family influence	Strong individual leadership influence
Organizational autonomy	Moderate	Limited–moderate	Limited
Institutionalization	Relatively established	Relatively established	Developing/contested

Source: Author's analytical assessment based on party constitutions, Election Commission of Pakistan documents, and *relevant scholarly literature.*

The comparison indicates that the three parties share important characteristics but should not be treated as identical. PPP and PML-N possess longer organizational histories and stronger institutional continuity, while PTI represents a comparatively newer organizational formation. Nevertheless, all three demonstrate tensions between formal democratic structures and concentrated leadership authority. The principal difference lies in the form of personalization**.** PPP's personalization is strongly associated with the Bhutto-Zardari political lineage, PML-N's with the Sharif family, while PTI's is primarily associated with the dominant leadership of Imran Khan.

From the perspective of Party Institutionalization Theory, PPP and PML-N demonstrate greater organizational continuity and societal reification because of their longer histories, whereas PTI's institutionalization remains more closely connected to the development of durable structures independent of its dominant leader. However, organizational longevity alone does not guarantee intra-party democracy. As Randall and Svåsand (2002) emphasize, institutionalization involves multiple dimensions, including autonomy and systemness. Similarly, Michels' (1962) argument suggests that even established organizations can develop oligarchic tendencies.

Discussion

The comparative findings demonstrate that intra-party democracy and political party institutionalization in Pakistan are closely connected but should not be treated as identical concepts. The analysis of PPP, PML-N, and PTI indicates that all three parties possess formal organizational structures, constitutions, internal elections, and mechanisms for selecting office-bearers. However, the practical autonomy of these institutions remains constrained by centralized leadership, political families, and influential party elites. This finding supports the argument of Randall and Svåsand (2002) that party institutionalization involves more than the existence of formal organizational structures. It also requires systemness, value infusion, autonomy, and reification. The evidence further suggests that electoral longevity and electoral success do not automatically produce strong intra-party democracy. Instead, institutionalization depends on whether party structures develop the capacity to operate independently of dominant political personalities and whether ordinary

members possess meaningful opportunities to participate in organizational decision-making.

Intra-Party Democracy and Institutionalization

The comparison suggests that greater intra-party democracy can contribute to stronger party institutionalization, but the relationship is neither automatic nor linear. PPP and PML-N demonstrate relatively established organizational structures because of their long political histories, electoral experience, and continued societal recognition. However, their institutional development exists alongside significant family influence in leadership and succession. PTI, despite its rapid electoral expansion and organizational mobilization, has faced greater challenges concerning the development of autonomous internal institutions. These findings support Scarrow's (2005) argument that intra-party democracy involves meaningful participation in leadership selection, policy development, candidate selection, and internal accountability rather than merely conducting formal elections. Similarly, Cross and Katz (2013) emphasize that the democratic quality of political parties depends on the extent to which members and representative bodies can exercise meaningful influence. Therefore, the findings indicate that formal institutionalization and substantive intra-party democracy may develop at different levels. A party can possess strong organizational continuity while still maintaining limited internal competition.

Leadership Centralization

Michels' (1962) Iron Law of Oligarchy provides an important explanation for the persistence of leadership centralization within Pakistan's major political parties. Michels argued that organizational development creates opportunities for leaders and specialized elites to accumulate knowledge, resources, and decision-making authority. Over time, this concentration can weaken the influence of ordinary members. The comparative findings are consistent with this theoretical expectation. PPP's leadership has remained strongly connected to the Bhutto-Zardari political tradition, PML-N has maintained a strong association with the Sharif family, while PTI has developed around the dominant political leadership of Imran Khan. Although the forms of personalization differ, the underlying organizational tendency is similar: formal party institutions coexist with substantial concentration of political authority. This does not necessarily mean that party members have no influence; rather, it suggests that the scope of member participation may be restricted by the authority of dominant leaders. Consequently, the Pakistani cases demonstrate the continuing relevance of Michels' argument that democratic organizations can develop oligarchic tendencies even when democratic procedures formally exist.

Elite Domination

Elite Theory further explains why leadership centralization can persist within formally democratic organizations. Classical elite theorists such as Mosca (1939), Pareto (1966), and Mills (1956) emphasize the capacity of organized minorities and resource-rich groups to exercise disproportionate political influence. In Pakistan, political families constitute one important form of elite influence. The Bhutto-Zardari and Sharif political networks have played significant roles in shaping the leadership and organizational identity of PPP and PML-N, respectively. At the same time, elite influence should not be reduced exclusively to political families. Senior party officials, influential electoral candidates, wealthy political actors, and individuals with strong local political networks may also influence candidate selection, organizational appointments, and access to political resources. Candidate selection is particularly important because control over nominations provides party elites with an important mechanism for shaping parliamentary representation (Rahat & Hazan, 2001). The findings therefore suggest that intra-party democracy is influenced not only by formal organizational rules but also by unequal distributions of political and organizational resources.

Institutionalization versus Personalization

One of the most important findings of this study is that the central challenge facing Pakistan's major political parties is not the absence of formal organizational structures, but the limited autonomy of these structures from dominant political personalities and elite networks. PPP, PML-N, and PTI all possess organizational constitutions and formal mechanisms for internal elections, yet the influence of dominant leader's remains significant. This distinction is particularly important within Randall and Svåsand's (2002) framework because institutionalization requires organizational autonomy in addition to systemness and societal recognition. A party may therefore be highly visible, electorally successful, and organizationally extensive while remaining only partially institutionalized if its internal institutions cannot operate independently of dominant leaders. The findings also indicate that personalization takes different forms. PPP and PML-N display stronger elements of family-based political continuity, whereas PTI demonstrates a more leader-centered form of personalization. Nevertheless, all three cases illustrate the tension between institution-centered party organization and personality-centered political authority. The study consequently argues that strengthening intra-party democracy in Pakistan requires more than periodic internal elections. It requires competitive leadership selection, transparent candidate nomination, meaningful member participation, internal accountability, and organizational institutions capable of exercising authority independently of individual leaders and elite networks. Such reforms would strengthen both substantive intra-party democracy and the long-term institutionalization of Pakistan's political parties.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between intra-party democracy and political party institutionalization in Pakistan through a comparative analysis of the PPP, PML-N, and PTI during the period 2008–2025. The study focused on leadership selection, internal party elections, candidate selection, policy-making, leadership succession, member participation, and organizational autonomy. The central argument was that the existence of formal democratic procedures within political parties does not necessarily guarantee meaningful intra-party democracy. Rather, substantive internal democracy depends on the extent to which party members and organizational institutions possess genuine authority to participate in decision-making and hold leaders accountable.

The findings indicate that all three parties possess formal organizational structures and mechanisms for intra-party elections. However, significant differences exist between formal institutional arrangements and their practical operation. PPP and PML-N demonstrate relatively established organizational structures because of their long political histories, electoral experience, and strong societal recognition. Nevertheless, both parties continue to experience considerable influence from political families. PPP's organizational identity and leadership have remained closely associated with the Bhutto-Zardari political tradition, while PML-N has been strongly influenced by the Sharif family. PTI represents a different form of personalization because its organizational identity and political mobilization have been strongly associated with Imran Khan. These differences demonstrate that personalization can take both dynastic and individual leader-centered forms.

The comparative findings further demonstrate that internal party elections are an important but insufficient indicator of intra-party democracy. The three parties maintain formal procedures for selecting party office-bearers, but the competitiveness, inclusiveness, and practical influence of these procedures remain important concerns. This supports Scarrow's (2005) argument that intra-party democracy should be understood in terms of meaningful participation rather than simply the existence of formal elections. Similarly, Cross and Katz (2013) emphasize that internal democratic practices depend on the degree to which party members and representative institutions can exercise meaningful influence over organizational decisions.

The study also finds an important relationship between intra-party democracy and party institutionalization. Randall and Svåsand (2002) argue that institutionalization involves systemness, value infusion, autonomy, and reification. The Pakistani cases demonstrate that organizational longevity and electoral success can contribute to institutionalization but do not necessarily guarantee organizational autonomy. PPP and PML-N possess relatively established party structures, yet the continuing influence of political families limits the independence of some organizational processes. PTI has achieved considerable electoral and organizational expansion but faces greater challenges in developing durable institutions that can operate independently of its dominant leadership.

Leadership structures therefore emerge as one of the most important factors affecting intra-party democracy in Pakistan. Michels' (1962) Iron Law of Oligarchy helps explain why formal democratic organizations may gradually experience concentration of authority among leaders and organizational elites. The evidence from PPP, PML-N, and PTI demonstrates that strong leadership can facilitate electoral mobilization and organizational cohesion, but excessive concentration of authority can restrict internal competition, member participation, and institutional autonomy. Elite Theory similarly highlights the influence of political families, senior party officials, influential candidates, and resource-rich political actors in shaping internal party decisions (Mills, 1956; Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1966).

8.2 Recommendations

Political parties should conduct intra-party elections at regular intervals in accordance with their constitutions and the Elections Act, 2017. However, elections should go beyond procedural compliance and provide genuine competition among candidates. Party members should be able to nominate candidates, campaign internally, and vote without undue pressure from senior leadership. Competitive internal elections can improve leadership accountability and reduce excessive concentration of organizational authority (Cross & Katz, 2013; Scarrow, 2005).

Political parties should develop clear and transparent procedures for selecting candidates for national, provincial, and local elections. Greater participation by registered party members and local organizational units should be encouraged. Selection criteria should be publicly communicated within the party, while mechanisms should be established through which members can challenge or appeal candidate-selection decisions. A broader selectorate can reduce the concentration of candidate-selection authority among party elites and strengthen internal participation (Rahat & Hazan, 2001).

Central executive committees, provincial organizations, general councils, and local party bodies should possess meaningful decision-making authority. Party institutions should not function merely as mechanisms for implementing decisions taken by dominant leaders. Greater institutional autonomy would strengthen systemness and autonomy, two important dimensions of party institutionalization identified by Randall and Svåsand (2002). Party constitutions should therefore clearly define the powers and responsibilities of different organizational bodies.

Political leaders should be subject to effective institutional checks and internal accountability mechanisms. Party leaders should regularly report to elected party councils and executive bodies concerning major organizational and political decisions. Internal mechanisms should also exist for members to raise complaints against party officials. Such arrangements would help prevent excessive concentration of authority and address the oligarchic tendencies identified by Michels (1962).

Local party organizations should have greater influence over policy development, candidate selection, leadership elections, and organizational decisions. Grassroots members should not be treated merely as electoral mobilizers during general elections. Regular local meetings, consultations, policy forums, and member conventions could provide institutionalized opportunities for participation. Greater grassroots involvement would strengthen members'

identification with the party and potentially contribute to value infusion, another dimension of party institutionalization (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

Political parties should establish transparent and regularly updated membership databases. Members should be able to verify their membership status and understand their rights concerning voting, contesting internal elections, and participating in party activities. Transparent membership systems can reduce disputes concerning voter eligibility during intra-party elections and create a clearer connection between party membership and organizational participation. Digital membership and internal voting systems could also improve participation, provided that appropriate safeguards for transparency and data protection are established.

The Election Commission of Pakistan should continue monitoring compliance with statutory requirements concerning intra-party elections under the Elections Act, 2017. However, regulatory oversight should focus primarily on ensuring procedural legality, transparency, and equal opportunities for party members while respecting the organizational autonomy of political parties. The ECP should provide clear guidelines concerning election schedules, membership lists, nomination procedures, voting arrangements, and certification requirements. At the same time, oversight should avoid unnecessarily interfering with legitimate differences between parties in their internal organizational structures. A balanced regulatory approach could strengthen democratic standards while preserving the constitutional autonomy of political parties (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2017).

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